

WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

By BRUCE BARRETT

Bay Players Soar in Music Man

Wake up Nana, scrub down the kids, and give the sitter the night off. Better yet, buy her a ticket and bring her along. Bay Players' *Music Man* enchants the whole house, from babes in arms to grandparents, and everyone in between. Even a tough-to-please middle-school contingent beams, laughs, and sings along.

River City, Iowa in 1912 is a quaint setting indeed. Stuffy, prosperous and lovely, the town sleeps in delightful self-satisfaction, doting on itself and its children. Salesman "Professor" Harold Hill (Michael Hammond) fans the town's indolence into action. He sows the absurd notion that the town's children are little more than hundreds of potential degenerates, eager to leap into a life of vice and drag their schoolmates with them. "Gotta figure out a way to keep the young ones moral after school!" he says. The solution — start a boys' marching band, instruments, uniforms and all. Could the pleasures of the flesh ever compete with a golden slide trombone? Hill arranges all the sales, and pockets a healthy fee. Musical instruction? Unnecessary. The kids will learn by his revolutionary "Thinking Method," just like they learn how to whistle. He expects to bolt when the final payments are collected. Instead, he falls in love with Marian Paroo (Kate deLima), the town's librarian and piano teacher.



Sharon Petti's Eulalie (the Mayor's wife)

Kate is stunning. Her Marian sees through Hill's scamming, but sees well enough to find the man beneath, and fall in love. Thanks in part to her gutsy Irish Mom (Connie O'Brien), she learns to see with her heart as well as her eyes. Kate sings Marian to life with the voice, beauty, and grace to make her unforgettable. And can she ever wear a dress!

All of the costumes, in fact, are fabulous. Co-producer Maura Troiano coordinates them, with the help of 11 others. With nary a hitch, 70 people form beautiful tableaux one after the other. The Barber Shop Quartet, the kids in the library, the whole town on the square – scene after scene fills the eye with pictures from the past, alive again.

Hill is played by Michael Hammond, also the show's choreographer. Michael's energy, like his character's, is infectious. What a smile! His "Seventy-six Trombones" was a showstopper, but I remember best his "Trouble in River City." Michael's singing ranges beautifully from the lyrical to the machine-gun staccato of creator Meredith Willson's talking ragtimes. Meanwhile, his choreography carries the show along with eye-popping flourish. Even the massive excitement is graceful. All the little dancers, right down to the youngest (5 year-old Mary O'Malley), hit their marks with joy and confidence.

Hammond is part of a trio driving the artistic success of the show. Music Director Meri-Lee Mafera beautifully leads the ensemble and orchestra through Willson's tongue-testing pyrotechnics and all the American musical forms gathered for the show. Director Kelly Hines Brown completes the team. The trio gives us fast-paced, crystal-clear execution with polish

and style. The night is filled with highlights. Standout moments are Marian's comic "take" into a scene-closing spot light, marvelous friezes at the end of production numbers, and the riveting timing of the Quartet, the Ladies Guild, and the Salesmen that start the ball rolling.

River City's Mayor (richly played by David Connor) poses the greatest threat to Hill's scheme. His jumbled phrases and sideways logic are a scream. He tolerates nothing from town's young rascals, from Hill, or from the natural strains and wonders of youth coming of age. It's his only policy. Tolerate no infraction. Expel any violator from the town. He's a buffoon who can't string an intelligible sentence together, but at least he's lovable, and in the end, teachable. He fails to expel anyone. Love, wisdom, and the power of a town brought to life prove to be the real solutions. Why, it's as clear (as the Mayor puts it) as a buttonhook in a well.

Meredith Willson said *The Music Man* began when he invented a character named Winthrop, a small Iowa boy with a lisp. Will McDonald plays the lad, Marian's little brother who remains deeply troubled by the death of their father two years earlier. His lisp is a poignant challenge, not a comic flaw; Winthrop's explosion of courage and hope in the climax of Act I ("Wells Fargo Wagon") brought me to tears. Will is an outstanding performer.

Connie O'Brien's Mrs. Paroo, Sharon Petti's Eulalie (the Mayor's wife), Kristen Schnibbe's Zaneeta (their daughter), Madison Rockwell's Amaryllis, Chris Clough's Marcellus, and Randy Pease's rascally Tommy Djilas round out the supporting cast beautifully.

So many more talents than I can list. Co-Producers Maura Troiano and Marguerite Copel have given us – cast, crew, and audience alike – a wonderful gift. You'll see it in the faces on stage, and those all around you. It's a heroic moment when the Wells Fargo Wagon comes to town. Heroic and beautiful. If you've never seen the Bay Players pull out all the stops, now's your chance. And don't forget Nana.